

Prayer and Self Denial 2015

How to Hook a Fisherman

Luke 5:1-11

One of my favourite walks in Tauranga is around the mount, along with every other person who lives in or visits Tauranga. Up the mount is great, an amazing view but it is hard to walk up, talk and breathe all at the same time. Around the mount is great, we can walk, talk and enjoy the sights and sounds. One of the regular sights we see are fishermen, sometimes we will sit and watch for a bit, but in the countless times we have walked around and the hundreds of fishermen we have seen, not once have we seen anyone catch anything.

As I read the text in preparation for Self-denial, (when Jesus tells the fisherman to go back out and put their nets down after fishing all night) I couldn't help but think of the fisherman around the mount. I don't think anyone can really appreciate the miracle which Jesus performed in this passage unless he or she is a true fisherman. A true fisherman is one who will persist at his task for hours, on the mere possibility of making a great catch. The non-fisherman would ask, "How can you stand there in the cold for hours, hoping to catch a fish?" and any true fisherman would answer with a simple, "Easy."

Let's read the story

Luke 5:1-11

5 One day as Jesus was preaching on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, great crowds pressed in on him to listen to the word of God. ² He noticed two empty boats at the water's edge, for the fishermen had left them and were washing their nets. ³ Stepping into one of the boats, Jesus asked Simon, its owner, to push it out into the water. So he sat in the boat and taught the crowds from there.

⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Now go out where it is deeper, and let down your nets to catch some fish."

⁵ "Master," Simon replied, "we worked hard all last night and didn't catch a thing. But if you say so, I'll let the nets down again." ⁶ And this time their nets were so full of fish they began to tear! ⁷ A shout for help brought their partners in the other boat, and soon both boats were filled with fish and on the verge of sinking.

⁸ When Simon Peter realized what had happened, he fell to his knees before Jesus and said, "Oh, Lord, please leave me—I'm too much of a sinner to be around you." ⁹ For he was awestruck by the number of fish they had caught, as were the others with him. ¹⁰ His partners, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were also amazed.

Jesus replied to Simon, "Don't be afraid! From now on you'll be fishing for people!" ¹¹ And as soon as they landed, they left everything and followed Jesus.

This story is more than just a fisherman's story of a great catch. It is not really about the fish that are "hooked" but the fishermen who are 'hooked', Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, and their partners James and John.

From this point on, Luke informs us, these men left their jobs as fishermen and followed Jesus wherever He went. This event is therefore one of the turning points in the life of the disciples. Don't forget that it is Peter, James and John, the three named fishermen here, who are the inner three of the circle of disciples, those three who were privileged to witness events which the other disciples did not see (for example, the transfiguration of Jesus, cf. [Luke 9:28](#)).

The Background of this Miracle

As you may know Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the synoptic gospels because they include many of the same stories, often in a similar sequence and in similar wording. John is structured a bit different, not a synoptic gospel, but is still one of the gospels.

At first glance, it seems the Matthew and Mark accounts are the same story as that of Luke 5:1-11. But there are many scholars who say the differences between the accounts of Matthew and Mark are so different from that of Luke that they cannot possibly see these texts as being a description of the same event. The conclusion they come to is that they say that there are a number of callings of the disciples, chances are that there are several stages of commitment reflected in the Gospels.

What do I mean by that? One of the questions many people have asked is how incredible it was that those first disciples would up and leave everything so spontaneously, so instantly. Well chances are this was not the first time that Jesus had met them and chances are this was not the first time that Jesus had asked them to follow him. The stories in Mark and Matthew and John were

probably prior calls that Jesus gave them, they had hung with Jesus, they were getting to know him, listening to his teaching, but just carrying on with life. But then this event happened.

The Setting for the Miracle (5:1-3)

Picture this - Jesus was standing by the Sea of Galilee, which in some translations Luke calls the "lake of Gennesaret" (v. 1) It's the same place, not a contradiction. So a crowd had gathered around Jesus listening to Him preach the word of God. Behind the crowd of those who were crowding in on Jesus, there was the Sea of Galilee, and two boats were pulled up on the shore. One belonged to Peter (v. 3) and Andrew, and the other belonged to James and John (vv. 7, 10). It seems that these four fishermen were not among the crowd. Instead, they were off to the side washing their nets (v. 2). They had spent a long and fruitless night fishing (5).

The interesting thing about this scene is that the wrong people seem to be close to Jesus, and the wrong people seem to be at a distance. You would think that the 'would be' disciples, Peter and Andrew, James and John, who had already spent quite a bit time with Jesus, would be those in the inner circle, closest to the teacher. Instead, the crowds pressed upon Jesus, and the disciples were off at a distance, tending to business, washing their nets. They may have been listening as they worked, but as far as we can tell they were surprisingly detached from Jesus and from the crowd.

Obviously we can't know this for certain but I think that Jesus' appearance here at the lake was probably not coincidental. He intended to be there, knowing that this is where the disciples would be. I am pretty sure it was no accident that the boat into which Jesus stepped, and from which He taught, was Peter's. Jesus pretended to merely be escaping the crowds and doing what would make His speaking more effective and efficient. I think, however, that Jesus was seeking the disciples. It was time for them to become permanently attached to Him, accompanying Him wherever He went. The time for a deeper level of commitment and involvement had come. The appearance at the lake that day was for the purpose of bringing about a life-changing decision on the part of Peter and his companions. Jesus would momentarily use the boat as His pulpit, but He was intent on making fishermen, fishers of men.

The Catch of a Lifetime (5:4-7)

We are told the disciples had finished washing their nets and had probably hung them out to dry. Jesus had likewise finished His teaching, and asked Peter to take the boat out to deeper water, and to let down the nets for a catch. Notice these words of our Lord:

"Now go out where it is deeper, and let down your nets to catch some fish." (Luke 5:4).

Jesus doesn't seem to say this as a suggestion; it seems to be a command. And He did not ask the disciples to let down their nets to **try** to catch fish; He ordered them to put out their nets **for** a catch of fish. Jesus was a carpenter, not a fisherman, but here was Jesus issuing fishing instructions.

As I have said many a time it is always difficult to know the tone of what is written in the bible but I think Peter's words betray a hesitancy, perhaps even a bit of irritation:

⁵ "Master, we worked hard all last night and didn't catch a thing. But if you say so, I'll let the nets down again." (Luke 5:5).

Peter's words indicate that he and his partners were shattered. They had worked hard all night.

- Besides that, they had just finished washing their nets. They would have to do it all over again.
- Not only that, Peter indicates that their efforts had been futile all night, and night was the best time to fish and if they had not caught anything at night, how in the world would they catch anything in the daytime, the worst possible time to fish.
- And then finally there is a hint of irritation there. Jesus is a carpenter, becoming a teacher... what does he know about fishing?

So for some reason unknown to us, Peter relented and let down the nets, but I get the impression that Peter wanted this venture to fail, so that he could give Jesus an "I told you so" look. Surely when it came to catching fish, he was the expert, yes Jesus was the teacher and so His word would be obeyed, albeit under protest.

The result was incredible. There were those stories that all fishermen loved to tell, about good catches, but this beat all that Peter had ever heard, by far! The nets were absolutely full. They began to break. They yelled to their mates for

help, and even with two boats, the catch was so large that both boats began to sink. The catch of a lifetime had been made.

The Disciples' Response (5:8-11)

Every one of Jesus' miracles had its purpose, and this one was no exception. There was a "catch" to the story, but it wasn't about fish, and it is now to be disclosed.

Simon Peter was the leader and the spokesman for the others. He immediately responded by falling down at the feet of Jesus, saying,

"Oh, Lord, please leave me—I'm too much of a sinner to be around you."
([Luke 5:8](#)).

Peter now saw Jesus in an entirely different light. Jesus wasn't the carpenter, come rabbi; Jesus was Lord, and he (Peter) was a sinful man. In verse 5 Peter called Jesus "Master," but now He is "Lord". The change of title Peter uses is a quantum leap in Peter's grasp of Jesus' greatness and power. And Peter not only confessed the greatness and holiness of Jesus, but also his own sinfulness.

And Jesus' response to Peter's confession is perplexing, because it is not immediately apparent as to how His words relate to Peter's confession:

"Don't be afraid! From now on you'll be fishing for people!" ([Luke 5:10](#)).

Peter had just confessed to being a sinner, and acknowledged the greatness of His Lord and Jesus responds by a command 'not to fear', and a promise that he would 'become a fisher of men'. How do Jesus' words make sense with what Peter has just said?

Don't be afraid! What might have been Peter's fears?

Probably Peter was fearful of leaving his life's occupation of fishing, his security, to follow Jesus. Note the contrast between the first two verses of our text and the last verse. The story begins by describing the great crowd which had surrounded Jesus, while the fishermen are off in the distance, tending to the washing of the nets—tending to business. By the time the story is concluded in verse 11 the disciples leave everything and follow Jesus:

As I mentioned before, chances are that on several occasions, over a period of time, Jesus has invited Peter and his fishermen partners to follow Him. I don't believe that Jesus' invitation was only a one time invitation nor was it only for a short period of time. I believe that these men understood the implications of

Jesus' invitation, but were afraid to leave their life's work to follow Him wherever He went.

What might have caused Peter and the other three fishermen fear of leaving their boats and their jobs? I agree that I am reading between the lines, but I suspect that they were fearful concerning the very practical matter of providing for themselves and their families. Jesus was cool and the longer they were with Jesus, the more they wanted to be with Him. But you see, they had responsibilities and financial obligations to consider, too. I can just see Peter telling his wife that he would love to be able to go with Jesus when He travelled to more distant places, ... "But Peter," she may have protested, "How can we pay the bills?" The children need clothes, the roof on the house needs repairing, and you know that we have to care for my mother ... "

Of course, these were very practical matters. But this miracle with the fish demonstrated in a very remarkable way that Jesus was not only to be trusted as a Teacher and Prophet and Miracle-worker, but also as their great Provider. With this remarkable catch, Jesus showed that He was able to provide. He was sovereign in the matter of work, as well as in all other matters. With this miracle Peter's fears about following Jesus melted. He and his partners walked away without a thought, without even bothering with that huge catch of fish. The fears which had hindered them vanished with the catch of fish.

Second, chances are that Peter and his partners were fearful about commencing an entirely new career – fearful about the future.

Not only did the call to follow Jesus require these fishermen to leave their career, it required them to commence an entirely new career. Jesus likened the new career of the disciples to the old. In both cases they would fish. There was some kind of continuity in their tasks. It would seem that the first occupation had prepared them for the second. But even more than this, Jesus gave these men the promise that they would be fishers of men, a promise which in the light of their huge catch, included being very successful fishers of men. How easy to leave one task for which you have just set a new world's record, to take on another, which you are assured you will succeed at. How gracious was our Lord's dealings with these disciples.

Third, Peter's was fearful because he recognized his sin and the Lord's righteousness.

The words of Peter, "Depart from me, Lord," reveal his awareness that a holy God cannot have intimate communion with sinful men. While Peter had no

desire to leave His Lord, He did not know how he could enter into an even more intimate relationship with the immensity of his sin. Jesus did not fully answer Peter's objection on this count, He only assured him by telling Him to stop fearing.

While Peter in no way understood this then, we know that ultimately the Lord's provision for Peter's sin is even more abundant than His provision of fish. That provision will be made at the cross, where He will die in the sinner's place. Communion and intimacy with God is abundantly provided by the Lord's sacrificial death. It is too early for Peter to know about this, and so he is simply assured, without any specific details being given.

Conclusion

THE MEANING OF THIS INCIDENT FOR PETER AND HIS PARTNERS

For Peter (and Andrew too, it seems), James and John, the three who will make up the inner circle of Jesus followers, this incident is a major turning point. It seems that they have followed or hung out with Jesus before, but only partially, only for a time. Now, these disciples have made the decision to leave their careers and follow Jesus wherever He went. This was no small decision. It was a crisis of careers and a mid-life crisis combined. From this moment on, Jesus would begin to pour more of His life into these disciples. The more intimate aspects of His life and ministry would now be made known to them.

THE MEANING OF THIS INCIDENT FOR US

We have run out of time to deal with this properly, I had planned to speak on this over two weeks but I lost a week, but there are two things that I want to say

The first is what I think the text does not mean.

This text is not teaching that those who are most committed to Jesus must leave their secular jobs to be his disciples.

We talked a bit about this in our recent series on faith and work. There are some Christians who feel like second class Christians because they are not in "full-time Christian service." There are some who have entered into "full-time Christian service" on the faulty idea that this would make them more significant, spiritual Christians. The Bible does not teach this, and this text does not teach this, though some may wrongly conclude that it does.

This passage is about fishing for people, taking the good news to the people and isn't it true that we often bring Christ to the world by living and witnessing for Christ in and through our work. Spirituality (nearness to Christ) is not determined by whether or not we have "sacred or secular" jobs. We need only remember that the apostle Paul generally supported himself through "secular" employment. (cf. [Acts 20:33-35](#)).

What, then, does our text have to teach us? Primarily, our text deals with the matter of following Jesus.

That if we are to be followers of Christ, we must do what He does. Jesus came to fish, "to seek and to save" the lost. The disciples were to become "fishers of people" not only because Jesus would command them to do so, but because this is Jesus' mission. These Disciples would become "fishers of people," not so much because they were fishermen, but because Jesus had come to catch people into His kingdom. To follow Christ, to be a Christian, means to do as He does. Those who would be followers of Christ cannot ignore the fact that Jesus was a seeker of people, and thus we, too, must be fishers of people.

I criticise those fishermen I see around the mount, the lack of fish that I have seen. But they are far more likely to catch a fish than I am, I don't even cast a line out into the sea! That's not an option if we claim to follow Jesus, fishing for people is an inseparable part of the calling of a disciple of Jesus.